The New Testament Gospels are so focused on Jesus’ teachings and miracles that they give few details of his life experiences. They do not mention that growing up on the ridge of Nazareth, he spent his childhood watching the reconstruction of Galilee’s first Roman-style city, Sepphoris, just five miles away. Or that during the years of his Capernaum ministry, he could see the ongoing erection of Galilee’s second city, Tiberias.

They also fail to mention Mount Arbel, a cliff-top mountain that dominates the skyline on the northwest side of the Sea of Galilee, a peak which he would have seen every day from Capernaum. But what would Jesus have seen at night?

Capernaum sits at the north end of the Sea of Galilee, a large fresh-water lake in a geological bowl so deep that its surface lies below sea level. Today, the high hills around the lake are covered with towns and villages. At night, all of them are shining, like candles on a circle of cakes. The lights of the modern city of Tiberias cascade down the hills, looking like a rock slide lit up like a state fair midway. The lake reflects a great deal of the light.

In Jesus’ day, it would have been much darker. There was no electricity, of course, so the only lights would have been fires, lamps and torches. The population of the region was lower than today as well, so fewer towns and villages existed.

Add to that the practice of farmers and rural people starting their day at sunrise and going to sleep after sunset, and you realize that at nighttime, much of Galilee would have been quite dark.

So, what lights would have shown out across the lake when Jesus looked south from Capernaum’s shore at night?

Close in, off to his left, he might have seen a few lights from the town (city?) of Bethsaida. To the right, there might have been some light from Magdala. This town of about 2,000 people formed the center of the Galilean fishing industry. Fishermen from around the region sold their catches there, and the fish were dried and salted for shipment. The Roman name of the town, Tarichaeae, translates roughly as “fish factory,” and it was known for its excellent fish sauce as far away as Rome.

Farther south, along the western shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, stood the new city of Tiberias. Founded by Herod Antipas in 19 A.D., it was under construction during most of the 20s. Antipas moved his capital there from Sepphoris and it became both an economic and political center, with a thriving port and all the accoutrements of a “modern” Roman city. These included a hippodrome for racing during the day and a theater for more sophisticated evening entertainment.

So, the ancient city of Tiberias, down along the coastline to Capernaum’s southwest, would have been a source of nighttime illumination.

But the brightest and most obvious city at night would have been the Greek city of Hippos-Susita on the lake’s southeast side.

Hippos was not a Jewish city. It had been built by Greek inhabitants many centuries before at the top of a high, narrow hill. This hill, a basalt plug, stood out from the limestone-based hills around it. The city towered high above the Sea of Galilee, but not too far from its shore.

During the first century, Hippos was an independent and powerful city-state, controlling the territory surrounding it. It had its own harbor and minted its own coins, a coveted right in the ancient world.

With its long-established Graeco-Roman temples, its large marketplace and its theaters, Hippos would have been the “city on the hill” for Jesus, the city whose light was visible across the Sea of Galilee and which was the brightest object in the night. It would have reminded Jesus, and all Jewish Galileans, that they did not control their world, but that they were controlled by the Romans.

Perhaps Herod Antipas’s new city of Tiberias would grow to rival the light cast by Hippos but, in the first century, it had not yet done so.